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SUBJECT: HARPER GOVERNMENT TO SURVIVE THRONE SPEECH

REF: A. Ottawa 1924

- B. Ottawa 1910

11. (SBU) Summary. The Liberal leadership will not seek to bring down the Harper government over the contents of the October 16 Throne Speech, recognizing election fatigue among the voters. The Liberals have charged that the government's comments on Afghanistan were nonetheless too ambiguous, while saying that they could accept a true training role -- but not a combat mission -- for Canadian troops after 2009. They will offer an amendment to the Speech that insists on adherence to Kyoto Convention objectives and clarifies the nature of Canada's military role in Kandahar, among other issues. The government is unlikely to accept any substantive amendment from the Liberals, however. The next test of the government is likely to come -- sooner rather than later -- with the introduction of the government's omnibus crime bill. End summary.

ROUND ONE TO THE GOVERNMENT

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12. (U) In the formal Opposition response on October 17 to the government's second "Speech from the Throne" at the outset of the new session of Parliament (reftels), Liberal leader Stphane Dion admitted that the electorate did not support new elections after having gone through three national elections in three years, as well as several provincial elections and a few by-elections. He claimed that the idea of trying to bring down the Harper government over the contents of the Throne Speech and hold new elections in the near future was "too much in the eyes of Canadians." Instead, Dion announced that the Liberals will register their dissent by proposing a substantive amendment that calls upon the government to change its "weak approach" on climate change to allow Canada to catch up on Phase II of its Kyoto commitments, to announce the combat mission in Kandahar will end in February 2009 or morph into a purely training role, to take action on poverty, to reduce corporate taxes, and to rescind its decision on income trusts. However, the Liberal caucus will apparently abstain both on the amendment itself and on the final vote approving the Speech, thereby allowing the government to survive its first vote of confidence in the current session. (Alternatively, the government could conceivably strike a compromise with the Liberals and accept at least some of the Liberal amendment in a face-saving gesture.) Dion emphasized that the Liberals are determined to "make Parliament work in accordance with the wishes of the Canadian people" but swore that the Conservatives "will never form a majority government."

MOST PROBLEMATIC ISSUES

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13. (U) In his remarks in Parliament on October 17, Dion claimed that the Speech displayed "disconcerting" and deliberate ambiguity on the

future of Canada's mission in Kandahar province, which he described as a counterinsurgency operation, beyond February 2009. Dion said Liberals could likely accept reconfiguration of the mission to a purely training role, and complained that the government had already pre-empted the work of the new non-partisan advisory panel on Afghanistan by stating in the Speech that it wanted the mission to continue to train the Afghan police and army until 2011. He insisted that the government inform NATO allies and the Afghan government that the combat mission will end in 2009. Dion also charged that the Harper government had turned its back on Africa and on the crisis in Darfur, and insisted that the government's claim that "Canada is back" was "absurd" and untrue.

¶4. (U) On provisions to revise the Anti-Terrorism Act, Dion again complained the Speech was too vague, and warned the government "not to play politics" on the issue. He urged the government to accept earlier recommendations on this legislation from the Commons and the Senate. With respect to strengthening the Canadian federation, Mr. Dion said Liberals would work to promote the wise use of the federal spending power but "would not allow this Prime Minister to build a federalism of firewalls" to divide Canadians. On the economy, he criticized lack of action on promoting economic innovation, competitiveness, and productivity, on meeting challenges in the manufacturing sector and from emerging economies, and on resolving the softwood lumber dispute. He lamented a "missed opportunity" and incompetence in implementation over the past nineteen months on climate change, and pledged that Liberals will continue to push for Canada to meet objectives in phase II of the Kyoto Protocol.

SOME FAINT PRAISE

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¶5. (U) Dion that the Liberals themselves are "tough on crime" and indicated that the party might possibly support the proposed Omnibus Crime Bill, depending on its exact contents. He noted that the Liberals had supported five of the six government bills in the previous session on crime, none of which passed both Houses. He offered measured praise for the government's willingness to expand the scope of the Official Languages Act, its attention to the Arctic -- especially plans to build a world-class Arctic research station and complete mapping of the Arctic seabed (while criticizing the government for not developing small ports in this region) -- and its plan to continue modernizing the Canadian Forces (while charging that the government relied too extensively on non-tendered bids). He expressed unqualified support for the proposal to confer honorary Canadian citizenship on Aung San Suu Kyi.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: With the government set now to survive a vote of confidence by October 24 on the Throne Speech, all political eyes are on the next (of perhaps many) vote of confidence that the minority government must face, which will likely come later this year. Prime Minister Harper has already made clear that the first priority legislation to run this gauntlet will be the Omnibus Crime Bill, without specifying yet how quickly he would expect this to make its way through Parliament or how much flexibility the government would ultimately show in altering its draft to respond to Liberal and other comments.

WILKINS